

Against Epistemic Blame Scepticism

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Abstract

Ethics and epistemology are close philosophical disciplines which frequently overlap (Brown, 2017). One intersection between the two domains is the study of blameworthiness and the nature of epistemic and moral blame. In contemporary epistemology, recent attempts have been made to resist the notion of epistemic blame in its entirety. This view, which I refer to as 'epistemic blame scepticism', seems to challenge the notion of epistemic blame by reducing apparent cases of the phenomenon to examples of moral or practical blame. The purpose of this paper is to defend the notion of epistemic blame against two epistemic blame sceptics, Dougherty (2012) and Boulton (draft), defusing their criticisms and restoring belief in the distinct form of epistemic blame. I discuss a favourable argument for epistemic blame (Nottelmann, 2007) before providing original defences against Dougherty and Boulton's attempt to refute his claims. I then present and offer my own response to what I perceive to be the biggest challenge to epistemic blame, drawing from areas of epistemic deontology that have yet to be discussed in this literature. Finally, I present a new objection against epistemic scepticism which highlights how, if granted, their influence on the study of epistemic blame would be minor.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction
2. Introducing Epistemic Blame
3. What is Epistemic Blame Scepticism?
 - 3.1 Dougherty's 'Reducing' of Epistemic Responsibility
 - 3.2 Boulton's Epistemic Blame Scepticism
4. Nottelmann's Argument for a Distinct Epistemic Blameworthiness
 - 4.1 The Distinctiveness of Epistemic Blame
 - 4.2 Dougherty's Objection to Nottelmann's Position
 - 4.3 Boulton's Objection to Nottelmann's Position
5. Epistemic Purism
 - 5.1. Explaining Epistemic Purism
 - 5.2 Against Epistemic Purism
6. A Semantic Objection
7. Conclusion

1. Introduction

Talk of responsibilities, duties, and blameworthiness is a widespread phenomenon in the fields of epistemology and ethics. These fields frequently draw from one another, and the exploration of epistemic and moral blame is one of the most recent examples of this overlap (Brown, 2017). The discussion of epistemic blame is not just limited to epistemology and ethics, but is also pervasive in our everyday lives and plays an important part in society. Our everyday language implies a concept of epistemic blame as we often talk of holding people accountable for their beliefs, stating that one 'should have known better' or 'they ought to believe that x' (Cusimano, 2012). We also have special kinds of words and concepts for people who are notoriously irresponsible or bad believers, as opposed to when their beliefs are excusable. These different concepts seem to rely on the idea that we can be responsible and blameworthy believers.¹

In recent literature, however, some epistemologists have questioned the notion of epistemic blame and rejected it in its entirety. I will refer to this stance as 'epistemic blame scepticism', and will be focusing my attention on the epistemic blame sceptics Dougherty (2012) and Boulton (*draft*). In short, epistemic blame sceptics reject the claim that there is a distinctive form of epistemic blame, often reducing apparent cases of such to moral or practical blame. From this reasoning, sceptics claim that the notion of epistemic blameworthiness becomes redundant, meaning there is no need for it to exist in the literature, as a distinct form of epistemic blame would over-complicate the taxonomy and direct attention away from the real type of blame at hand.

The purpose of this paper is to defend the notion of epistemic blame against Dougherty's (2012) and Boulton's (*draft*) sceptical arguments, defusing their criticisms and restoring belief in a distinct form of epistemic blame.

The plan of this paper is as follows: I will begin section two by introducing epistemic blame and the account of blame I will be referring to in this paper. I will then present a brief overview of epistemic blame's place in society and the literature on epistemology, as well as detailing the account of blame that Dougherty (2012) and Boulton (*draft*) are rejecting. Moving onto section three, I will present the argument for epistemic blame scepticism. As already stated, I will focus on both Dougherty and Boulton's reductionist

¹ There are a variety of positive reasons to believe in epistemic blame. For examples, see literature regarding blameless norm violations (Lackey, 2007) and the norms of assertion (Williamson, 1996), as well as discussions on the popularity of epistemic blameworthiness in society (Nottelmann, 2007).

argument against epistemic blame, outlining the key components of their views and their similarities. In section four I will begin to critically assess the sceptical argument. Here, I will present an argument in favour of a distinct form of epistemic blame, offered by Nottelmann (2007), who claims that moral culpability presupposes epistemic culpability which demonstrates how moral and epistemic blame are distinct. I will then assess Dougherty's and Boulton's rejection of Nottelmann's argument, who are critical of the favourable conclusions that Nottelmann's argument presents for epistemic blame. In section five, I will critically examine an objection put forth by Boulton in favour of epistemic scepticism, known as the 'argument from epistemic purism', which I believe is also shared by Dougherty (2014). According to Boulton (*draft*), this is a concerning view which proponents of epistemic blame must commit to. From here, I will resist this objection by appealing to Stapleton's (2015) argument against the collapsing of epistemic duties, arguing that both Dougherty and Boulton's own understanding and division of the normative domains is far more concerning than the proponent of epistemic blame's commitment to epistemic purism. In section six, I present my own objection to the sceptical argument, which I refer to as the 'semantic objection'. Here, I will claim that even if Dougherty's and Boulton's sceptical argument against epistemic blame is granted, the consequences are not as influential as they desire them to be as their arguments are only semantically concerning at most. I will investigate Dougherty and Boulton's efforts to resist this claim, detailing why I find their efforts dissatisfying. I will conclude this paper by summarising the debate and leaving some remarks on further research and the direction others interested in this topic could explore.

2. Introducing Epistemic Blame

We routinely make judgements about what one ought to or ought not to believe. You ought not to believe falsehoods, or believe without sufficient evidence or justification, for example. When we make these judgements, we often respond negatively when people fail to comply. We acknowledge that they have failed in some sense, or done something wrong, and we regard them blameworthy by holding them responsible for these wrongdoings. Arguably, this form of blame is epistemic in its nature, in that it is an epistemic evaluation made about an epistemic action or lack of action. As Cusimano (2012) notes, philosophers traditionally associate the goal of truth as one of the defining features of the epistemic realm and the responsibilities associated with this are also concerned with achieving the truth. Arguably, it seems to naturally follow from this that if the epistemic responsibilities are epistemic in nature, the

blameworthiness that we attribute is due to a failure to carry out an epistemic responsibility, so is itself epistemic.

Having discussed a folk understanding of epistemic blame, we can now examine how it is defined in contemporary literature. As mentioned in my introduction, epistemologists have often discussed epistemic blame and blamelessness in their literature (see DeRose, 2002, Montmarquet, 1993, Lackey, 2007, Kelp and Simion, 2017 and Aristotle, 2009). More recently a variety of different accounts of epistemic blame have been proposed (Fricker, 2016, Brown, 2017, Sliwa *draft*, Simion, *draft*) These accounts of epistemic blame can be categorized as falling under the following four categories; traditionalism, conativism, functionalism or performance (Simion, *draft*)². Traditionalist accounts of epistemic blame are reductionist and prescribe to either an emotivist or cognitivist understanding of blame. The former defines blame as an emotion or set of emotions (Strawson, 1962), and the latter as believing or judging someone as blameworthy (Watson, 1996). Conative accounts of blame emphasize motivational elements, where you believe someone is blameworthy, and you desire they did not carry out the blameworthy action (Sher, 2006). Functionalist accounts of blame are anti-reductionist, and view blame as an internally diverse practice. For example, the function of blameworthiness may be essentially communicative (Fricker, 2016), or it may be that the function of blame is to protest (McGeer, 2013). Lastly, a performative account of blameworthiness views blame as a performative speech act, alike to ‘marrying’ or ‘promising’. To say you blame someone is to make a judgement but is also an action which requires a response (Simion, *draft*).

Dougherty (2012) and Boulton (*draft*) are not explicit in defining epistemic blame with regards to any of the above accounts. Nevertheless, I believe we can successfully interpret their account of blame as traditionalist and cognitive by focusing on their viewpoint of epistemic blame as a response to failure. With this in mind, I will refer to this account of blame throughout my paper. I will remain neutral as to whether this is the correct account of epistemic blame and will agree with Dougherty and Boulton in order to fair and not misdirect my objections.

Boulton considers two definitions of epistemic blame which he believes are both disarmed by his sceptical argument; “epistemic blameworthiness” can be read as referring to either a distinctively epistemic kind of blameworthiness, or blameworthiness for merely epistemic failings” (Boulton, *draft*, p.6). Despite remarking that epistemologists are often unclear about the distinction between the two readings, yet,

² I am aware that these categories of blame may sometimes overlap with each other and the taxonomy perhaps is not as distinct (Coates and Tognazzini, 2014).

arguably Boulton does little to explain the distinction himself. He does, however, expand on what he considers an epistemic failing account of blameworthiness to be, which is when blame is determined by the kind of failing one is blameworthy for. For example, if I commit an epistemic failing, such as believing an unjustified proposition, the blameworthiness attributed to me would apparently be epistemic, based on the type of failing it was (Boulton, *draft*). Defining blame as a ‘failure’ is arguably both traditionalist and cognitive, in that it assumes a standard which one judges that an agent has failed to achieve. For example, Watson (1996), a proponent of the cognitive account of blame, argues that to blame someone is to judge that they have failed with respect to some standard of excellence.

Dougherty is also inexplicit in what account of epistemic blame he is sceptical of and focuses more on defining epistemic irresponsibility as opposed to epistemic blameworthiness. However, he is clear to still direct his sceptical concerns towards a distinct form of epistemic blame “the basis of epistemic blameworthiness is epistemic...this is just the sort of picture I am opposing” (Dougherty, 2012, p.536). Again, like Boulton, we can define Dougherty’s account of epistemic blame as traditionalist and cognitive. Dougherty notes that responsibilists perceive displays of epistemic irresponsibility as a normative failing, which is a failure in fulfilling one’s telos. Like Boulton then, blameworthiness is tied to a failure in achieving a ‘telos’ or standard, which, as we have seen, is categorized as traditionalist and cognitive³.

In explaining the notion of epistemic blame and detailing the positions of my opponents, I have set up the basis for the epistemic blame sceptic’s critique. Armed with a clear, unified account of how we should understand epistemic blame, we can now move on to the next section of this paper and discuss the argument for epistemic blame scepticism.

3. What is Epistemic Blame Scepticism?

Despite, as outlined, the initial appeal and popularity of epistemic blame, the sceptical position claims that epistemic blame is not a distinct form of blame, as cases of blameworthiness for breaking epistemic

³ It is worth noting here that a traditionalist account of blame does not tend to account for epistemic blame, which supports my interpretation of Dougherty’s (2012) and Boulton’s (*draft*) understanding of epistemic blame, as well as making my argument more significant (Simion, *draft*).

norms are better explained as examples of moral or practical blameworthiness. I will be detailing the stances of two prominent sceptics about epistemic blame—Dougherty (2012) and Boulton (*draft*).

3.1 Dougherty's 'Reducing' of Epistemic Responsibility

Dougherty presents a variety of arguments in favour of epistemic blame scepticism, centred around the key claim that epistemic responsibility can be 'reduced'⁴. What Dougherty means by this claim, is that cases which appear to concern a distinct type of epistemic responsibility can be 'reduced', into other types of blame. Epistemic responsibility or blame identifies with other forms of blame on a base level, so arguably, there is no need to overcomplicate matters and define these types of blame as epistemic, especially not as *distinctively* epistemic.

According to Dougherty (2014), most cases of seemingly epistemic blameworthiness are either cases of moral or instrumental blameworthiness, or cases where no blame should be attributed at all. More specifically, Dougherty claims that cases of epistemic blameworthiness are not part of epistemology, and should be understood as falling within the domain of applied ethics, on par with medical and business ethics in that it is an aspect of ethical theory applied to a certain domain (Dougherty, 2014).

Dougherty summarises his reductionist argument in the form of his 'identity thesis', understood as follows;

IT: Each instance of [so-called] epistemic irresponsibility is just an instance of purely non-epistemic irresponsibility/irrationality (either moral or instrumental).

(Dougherty 2012, p.537)

It is important to note here that Dougherty still believes in a form of epistemic normativity, but that it does not lead to a robust 'ethics of belief' which responsibilists believe in. The only epistemic demands,

⁴ I will infer that Dougherty's use of 'responsibility' is interchangeable with 'blameworthiness'. I am aware that the notions of responsibility and blameworthiness can come apart (Scanlon, 1998, 2008), however, due to word constraints I will not be discussing this material in this paper.

and thus epistemic forms of responsibility and blameworthiness, are ones relating to evidential fit⁵. Dougherty argues that epistemic 'oughts' should only be understood as the following;

(EO) *One epistemically-ought to believe p if and only if p fits one's evidence.*

(Dougherty 2014, p.10)

Dougherty provides further support for his reductionist thesis by presenting an example to demonstrate how epistemic blame collapses into either moral or instrumental blame. We can briefly sketch this example now to further illustrate how Dougherty explains away an intuitive case of epistemic blameworthiness.

Craig the Creationist

Craig is a dysfunctional agent. He believes in creationism, the view that the universe and living organisms originate from acts of divine creation, as opposed to natural processes such as evolution. Craig was raised within a community of creationist believers. His parents believed in creationism, his school taught and favoured creationism and he only read books with a creationist bias. We can now imagine that I happen to meet Craig, and upon hearing of his creationist view, offer him some books on the topic which discuss the evolutionary viewpoint. However, Craig blindly refuses to read them, not wishing for his beliefs to be challenged.

From this information, it would appear that Craig's initial belief in creationism satisfies the standards for synchronic rationality (as his beliefs fit the evidence he had at the time, prior to our conversation), but he fails on diachronic rationality, i.e. an assessment of rationality across time. If we focus on the time in which I offered Craig the evolutionary books and he refused to read them, this arguably appears to be a case of *epistemic* irresponsibility. Craig had plenty of free time to read the books if he desired, and they are relatively short. By refusing to do so, however, he appears to be willfully ignorant, which is

⁵ As an evidentialist, Dougherty (2012) claims that 'lack of evidential fit' is a genuine epistemic criticism which one is blameworthy for.

epistemically irresponsible. Upon closer examination, however, Dougherty argues that the irresponsibility at hand is really a case of moral or instrumental irresponsibility. Dougherty argues for this statement by appealing to stakes, claiming that either there is something at stake for Craig, or not. If there is *not* something at stake, then Craig does nothing irresponsible or blameworthy in not being over-scrupulous in his creationist beliefs. If, on the other hand, there *is* something at stake for Craig, then it either relates to his own interests or the interests of others. If the former, then it would be instrumentally irresponsible and irrational for Craig to continue to sustain his beliefs in creationism, for he is actively believing in a falsehood which is a personal disadvantage to him. If the stakes regard the interests of others, as we have a duty to promote the interests of others, Craig's beliefs would be deemed morally irresponsible. As such, Dougherty explains away the intuitive attribution of epistemic irresponsibility to Craig's action by reducing it to cases of instrumental and moral irresponsibility. The form of blameworthiness which we would attribute here would be either instrumental or moral, as it would only be appropriate to blame Craig epistemically if there was something epistemically at stake, which there is not.

In summary, Dougherty is claiming that perceived cases of epistemic blame can be reduced to cases of moral or instrumental blame. Applying a form of Ockham's razor, there is no need to overcomplicate matters by arguing for a new species of blame, which only distracts from the other types of blame we should be really focusing on.

3.2 Boulton's Epistemic Blame Scepticism

Having outlined Dougherty's sceptical arguments against epistemic blame, we can now analyse the arguments of another proponent of the view, offered by Boulton (*draft*).

Boulton's argument against epistemic blame is similar to Dougherty's in its reductionist methodology, and the belief that epistemic blame is really a form of moral or practical blame. Boulton presents his view in the form of 'The Toy Argument', which I will now outline.

Boulton opens his argument with the following scenario;

Apple 1: Bill is staring directly at a red apple that is sitting on a table in good lighting. He hasn't missed any obvious defeaters, and he's normally reliable in distinguishing types of fruit under these sorts of conditions. With this information taken into account, Bill believes that there is a red apple on the table.

Apple 2: In a second scenario, Bill comes to form the belief (under the same conditions), that there is not a red apple on the table, but that either:

A) There is a green apple on the table

B) There is no apple on the table

C) There is a pear on the table

Having outlined these examples, Boulton turns to consider what our reaction towards Bill's belief in A, B or C would be. Boulton claims that he would feel puzzled at Bill's belief, even concerned for his health. What he would not feel, he states, is any sense that Bill's belief is blameworthy, arguing that to do so would be inappropriate. Even with the inclusion of further details, for example, if Bill was informed that if he arrived at the wrong belief, his brother would be shot, epistemic blameworthiness is still not attributable. This is because Boulton argues, it would not be clear what type of blameworthiness would be attributable in this scenario, particularly if it was distinctively a form of epistemic blameworthiness. Unless we fleshed out the details of the scenario to provoke intuitions about moral or practical blameworthiness, it seems wrong to blame Bill in any distinctively epistemic sense. From this, Boulton makes the following argument;

'The Toy Argument'

1.) It doesn't seem natural to blame someone for an epistemic failing unless something moral or practical is at stake.

2.) If 1) is true, then there is no such thing as distinctively epistemic blameworthiness

3.) So, there is no such thing as distinctively epistemic blameworthiness

(Boulton, *draft*, p.4)

To further illustrate his point, like Dougherty, Boulton also details an example to demonstrate how epistemic blameworthiness collapses into either moral or instrumental blame by explaining away an intuitive sense of epistemic blameworthiness.

Stan and the Sun

Stan is an astronomy student who was recently taught by a professor that the Sun is approximately 98 million miles away from Earth. Stan, however, always believed the Sun is much closer to the earth and is determined to hold onto his belief. He therefore rejects his professor's assertion and willfully chooses to be ignorant. As with Dougherty's 'Craig the Creationist' case, it appears we can attribute epistemic blameworthiness towards Stan's willful ignorance. Stan should believe his professor who is better informed on the topic than he is, so it appears we can epistemically blame Stan for actively *choosing* to believe in a falsehood⁶.

Boulton argues that the type of blame we wish to attribute towards Stan is better understood as moral or instrumental blame, despite it appearing to be epistemic. For example, if Stan is willing to disregard scientific findings on simple matters, then what else is he willing to also ignore? What will happen when Stan takes on instructive roles for example, or what example does he set for others around him? Taking these questions into account, Boulton highlights that what is at stake with Stan's belief is either moral or instrumental. Furthermore, if we take these stakes away, such as by allowing Stan's refusal to believe to be a one-off occurrence, the blameworthiness seems to be eradicated. Boulton argues that with this in mind, it seems too heavy-handed to attribute any sense of blameworthiness to Stan. What Boulton's example seems to demonstrate here is that seemingly intuitive cases of epistemic blameworthiness are better understood as examples of moral or instrumental blameworthiness. When we examine what is at stake, we find that it is either moral or instrumental, and the relevant blameworthiness stems from this. When nothing is at stake, we do not feel we must attribute any form of blame.

Having outlined the key components of Boulton's sceptical stance, it is evident that both Boulton's and Dougherty's arguments bear a great resemblance to one another. Whilst the parallels have yet to be

⁶ I am aware that this type of case assumes doxastic voluntarism which is contentious (see Williams, 1970).

However, due to word count limitations I will not be discussing this debate.

discussed in literature, it is clear that both sceptics offer a reductionist objection to epistemic blame, reducing intuitive examples of such to moral or instrumental blame. Both sceptics also centre their perception of blameworthiness around what is at stake and deny the existence of blameworthiness unless there is something moral or practical at stake. Moving on to the critical examination of both these views, the unity of these positions will arguably allow for my objections to address the key components of both Dougherty's (2012) and Boulton's (*draft*) sceptical arguments.

4. Nottelmann's Argument for a Distinct Epistemic Blameworthiness

4.1 The Distinctiveness of Epistemic Blame

Having outlined both epistemic blame and epistemic blame scepticism, we can now turn to critically assess the views put forth by both Dougherty (2012) and Boulton (*draft*). We can begin by presenting an argument in favour of a distinct form of epistemic blame, offered by Nottelmann (2007), which is discussed and dismissed briefly by both Dougherty and Boulton. I will critically assess Dougherty's and Boulton's objections, providing a novel defence of Nottelmann's argument for epistemic blame.⁷

Nottelmann argues for the distinctiveness of epistemic blame by establishing a theory of epistemic deontologism built upon epistemic blame. By appealing to legal considerations, Nottelmann makes the claim that moral culpability presupposes epistemic culpability, which demonstrates how moral and epistemic blame are distinct (2007). Nottelmann opens his argument for this by detailing a historic rape case from 1975, which caused widespread controversy when three men were not deemed blameworthy for their act of rape. The case consisted of three men, who were invited by their friend, Mr. Morgan, to have sexual intercourse with his wife. Mr. Morgan informed his friends that his wife was 'kinky' and would feign protest. When arriving at the Morgan household, all four men forcibly dragged Mrs. Morgan from her son's bed where she was sleeping, and each had forcible intercourse without her consent whilst the other men held her down. Mrs. Morgan attempted to scream for her son to call the police but was choked by the men. At the trial, the three men pleaded that they believed Mrs. Morgan had consented to sexual

⁷ My argument against Dougherty's rejection of Nottelmann (2007) is a point I have addressed in 'Is Epistemic Blame Distinct from Moral Blame?' (*draft*) and will now redevelop.

intercourse. In conclusion, The House of Lords held that the men made an honest, but mistaken, belief that Mrs. Morgan was consenting, which provided a complete defence.

Nottelmann claims that the men should have been considered blameworthy for their actions by arguing for a distinctive form of epistemic blameworthiness. From this he argues that if epistemic blameworthiness is not reducible to moral blameworthiness, moral blameworthiness must presuppose epistemic blameworthiness. Nottelmann locates the blameworthiness of the rape in the men's belief that Mrs. Morgan consented to sexual intercourse, stating it has "*epistemically undesirable properties (such as unreasonableness)*" (Nottelmann, 2007. p.10). It is this unreasonable belief which motivates the immoral act of rape, which leads Nottelmann to make the claim that epistemic culpability is presupposed by moral culpability. He appeals to a classic distinction in law known as the *actus reus* and the *mens rea* distinction, to further this presupposition (2007). The *actus reus* refers to the conduct element of a crime, which the defendant must have proven to have done. The *mens rea* is the psychological element of the crime, the intention or forethought which makes one morally culpable. Nottelmann compares the moral blameworthiness to the *actus reus*, and epistemic blameworthiness to the *mens rea*. As the intention comes prior to the action, this means that an agent must hold an epistemically undesirable belief prior to carrying the immoral action. This demonstrates how a clear-cut distinction can be made between the two forms of blame.

It is worth noting here that so far, Nottelmann (2007) appears to have demonstrated that there are cases in which the basis for blameworthiness is epistemic, but only with regards to the rape case. It may be true that this is not always the case, and Nottelmann offers little insight as to what other types of cases he also believes the basis for blame is epistemic. However, I do not take this as a concern of Nottelmann's argument, for he arguably does not need more than this modest claim to make his point. If there are examples where epistemic blame comes prior to moral blame, it simply cannot be the case that it reduces to moral blame. An agent must hold an epistemically unreasonable belief prior to the immoral act which the belief stems from, meaning epistemic blame must come prior to moral blame⁸.

In summary, Nottelmann has argued for a distinctive form of epistemic blame by locating blameworthiness in an agent's unreasonable belief. With an appeal to legal considerations, Nottelmann has argued that moral culpability presupposes epistemic culpability, which demonstrates how moral and epistemic blame are distinct.

⁸ I thank Mona Simion for raising this point in personal conversation.

4.2 Dougherty's Objection to Nottelmann's Position

Having briefly summarized Nottelmann's (2007) main argument for the distinctiveness of epistemic blame we can now turn to examine the concerns raised with his view by both Dougherty (2012) and Boulton (*draft*). In this next section, I will detail both Dougherty's and Boulton's responses to Nottelmann's argument before moving on to defend Nottelmann's position. I will achieve this by presenting my own critical responses to their objections, which I will raise on Nottelmann's behalf.

Dougherty rejects Nottelmann's position by arguing that just because the target of the blameworthiness is the belief, it does not follow that the nature of the blame is epistemic; beliefs can also be governed by moral, prudential norms (2012). Additionally, Dougherty claims that blame is located in the moral consequences of the act itself, and this is distinctively moral, not epistemic. Taking both of Dougherty's concerns into consideration, it seems Nottelmann fails to locate epistemic blameworthiness in the belief of a guilty agent or demonstrate how the blameworthiness we speak of is distinctively epistemic. It thus appears that Nottelmann fails to successfully argue for the distinctiveness of epistemic blame by appealing to the priority of epistemic blame over moral blame.

Despite Dougherty's concern, I believe we can resist his objection by claiming that the denial of epistemic irresponsibility results in the eradication of any moral irresponsibility too. If this commitment is correct, then it demonstrates how epistemic responsibility must come prior to moral responsibility, as Nottelmann originally claimed. So how can one deny the existence of epistemic irresponsibility? One could argue that the rapists may have searched for more evidence about Mr. Morgan's claim that his wife wanted to partake in sexual intercourse and found positive reasons to believe it, or perhaps they had no way to improve their epistemic situation, for example they had no epistemic defeaters against the claim. Despite the intuition that the three men were aware Mr. Morgan was lying, these epistemic situations do not seem too far-fetched. With this in mind, how does denying any claims of epistemic responsibility deny claims of moral responsibility? If we argue that there was nothing the men could do to better their situation and were therefore truly justified in believing that Mrs. Morgan enjoyed non-consensual sexual intercourse, there no longer seems to be any attribution of blame, moral or epistemic. Their epistemic situation may, at most, make them ignorant, but not culpably ignorant.

We can apply Goldman's case of the 'benighted cognizer' (1988) here to explain this point further, which I believe strengthens my response to Dougherty. Goldman details a society which uses unreliable methods to form beliefs about the future. The society uses astrology and oracles to assist in belief formation, thus ignoring proper scientific practice. We can imagine that a member of this society forms a belief about the outcome of an upcoming battle based on zodiacal signs. Goldman refers to this individual as a benighted cognizer, someone who has formed a belief via bad methods but knows no better way to inform himself. Arguably, it seems wrong to attribute any type of blame to the benighted cognizer for his faulty belief formation, despite the potentially disastrous consequences, for the individual has good reason to trust his cultural peers and has no way of acquiring better belief formation methods. We therefore find it hard to fault or blame them for believing what they do.

Bringing our argument back to Dougherty's objection, we can argue in defence of Nottelmann that blameworthiness is not located in the moral consequences of the act itself, for all moral consequences are eradicated if epistemic responsibility is also eradicated. The cognizer appears to be epistemically justified in their belief, and this excuses any sort of epistemic blameworthiness. It thus appears that blame can be distinctively epistemic and presuppose moral blameworthiness, for the men escape any attributions of moral blameworthiness if they are not deemed epistemically blameworthy.

It is also worth noting here a possible response from Dougherty against my defence of Nottelmann which we must address. Goldman's case of the benighted cognizer is similar to Dougherty's own case of Craig the creationist, where Craig also formed faulty beliefs under bad epistemic situations. With this in mind, perhaps it is possible for Dougherty to appeal to the same argument for this and claim that the benighted cognizer was not morally blameworthy, as nothing was at stake for him. This way, the reason we do not intuitively want to attribute blame does not rest upon there not being any attribution of epistemic blame. However, I think it seems quite clear that there is something at stake for the benighted cognizer, (e.g. the battle could go wrong), and yet, we still do not attribute blame. It seems then that Dougherty would be wrong to argue that cases which are not blameworthy are cases where nothing is at stake, meaning blame is not necessary located in what is at stake morally or practically, for there are cases of such where we do not attribute blame.

4.3 Boulton's Objection to Nottelmann's Position

We can now turn to critically examine the second sceptical objection offered against Nottelmann's (2007) argument for epistemic distinctiveness, presented by Boulton (*draft*). Boulton grants Nottelmann's claim that moral and legal blameworthiness may be located in the unreasonableness of a belief yet argues that a "significant leap is required to get from appropriate attributions of epistemic unreasonableness to appropriate attributions of epistemic blameworthiness" (Boulton, *draft*, p. 15). What Boulton is arguing here, is that a leap is being made by Nottelmann in claiming that the epistemic unreasonableness entails a distinct form of epistemic blameworthiness. Epistemic unreasonableness is not equal to and does not necessarily lead to epistemic blameworthiness.

It thus appears that Boulton finds the relationship between unreasonableness and blameworthiness problematic. More specifically, the relationship between *epistemic* unreasonableness and *epistemic* blameworthiness. I believe that exploring this relationship in more depth will expel the possible doubts that Boulton has raised.

Nottelmann talks of epistemic unreasonableness as a property of a belief which is undesirable from an epistemic perspective. He argues that unreasonableness is epistemically undesirable in the sense that an agent holding a belief does not have good and rational reasons for holding the said belief, where 'good and rational reasons' for belief are defined as adequate grounds and adequate evidence. Unreasonableness is just one of three other properties which lead to undesirable beliefs. Referring to them as 'epistemic indesiderata', Nottelmann also lists a "lack of formation by a truth-conducive process" and "inadequate basing" as the other two properties (Nottelmann, 2007, p. 70). With this in mind, undesirability is thus defined as "...an agent's holding of the belief that p is epistemically undesirable if, and only if, it is not formed and sustained by a reliable process, not based on adequate reasons, or unreasonable" (Nottelmann, 2007, p. 70)

Having understood unreasonableness as an epistemic notion, we can now examine how it relates to blameworthiness, addressing Boulton's concerns.

Although Nottelmann does not explicitly detail the relationship between unreasonableness and blameworthiness regards to the 1975 rape case, we can still succinctly apply his reasoning here to assist with our illustration.

The three rapists formed the belief that Mrs. Morgan was consenting to sexual intercourse. This belief is unreasonable in the sense that the men had inadequate grounds to believe Mr. Morgan's claim, and it is epistemic in the sense that it concerns the lack of good or rational reasons of a belief. In order to establish blameworthiness, we must consider whether the men may be excused in any way. It seems that Nottelmann (2007) would argue that the men may be excused only if their unreasonableness can be excused. What is meant by this, is that the men can be said to hold an unreasonable belief, but their reasons for doing so are excusable. For example, one could argue that the men had very low IQ's, so could not determine that Mr. Morgan was lying. Whether this excuse is credible or not, the main concern is that unless no good enough excuses can be made, the men cannot be considered blameworthy for the harm caused by their action, and this is based on an appeal to the epistemic notion of unreasonableness. Moral blameworthiness therefore stems from an agent holding an unreasonable belief which cannot be excused. It thus arises that moral blameworthiness must presuppose epistemic blameworthiness, for blame must first be attributed to epistemic unreasonableness in one's belief.

We can bring the discussion back to Boulton's (*draft*) concerns on the relationship between epistemic unreasonableness and blameworthiness. It now seems clear how Nottelmann manages to argue that blameworthiness originates in the unreasonableness of an agent's belief, and how this is a distinct form of epistemic blame which gives way to moral blame. Whilst epistemic unreasonableness does not necessarily give way to blame, it only fails to do so in cases where the unreasonableness can be excused, resulting in no attributions of blame, epistemic or otherwise being attributed. This in turn further demonstrates the locus of blame in the epistemic unreasonableness of an agent's belief. It is also worth noting here that Nottelmann does not argue that only unreasonable beliefs lead to blameworthiness. Blame can also be attributed through any of the other previously discussed properties which he deems epistemically undesirable, and we should be critical of analysing blame with regards to just epistemic unreasonableness. With this in mind, Boulton's ruling out of the connection between epistemic unreasonableness and blameworthiness does not necessarily shed doubt on the distinctiveness of epistemic blameworthiness.

In this section, we have outlined Nottelmann's argument in favour of a distinct form of epistemic blame. We then outlined and critically examined Dougherty and Boulton's objections to Nottelmann's position, in turn offering new defences for Nottelmann's position.

5. Epistemic Purism

5.1 Explaining Epistemic Purism

I will now turn to critically assess another objection to epistemic blame. The argument, known as 'the argument from epistemic purism', is put forth by Boulton in favour of epistemic scepticism. I take this to be one of the strongest arguments offered against epistemic blame, as, if true, it commits epistemic blame advocates to a position which makes the sceptic's argument stronger. Furthermore, it appears that denying this commitment comes at significant costs. I will now dedicate this section to exploring this objection in full.

Boulton's argument from epistemic purism concerns his understanding of the epistemic normative domain as isolated from other normative domains.

Epistemic Purism (EP): Evaluations made from the epistemic perspective comprise a distinct normative domain; they do not, qua epistemic evaluation, involve practical, moral, or other kinds of normative considerations.

(Boulton, *draft*, p.9)

Boulton argues that proponents of epistemic blame may attempt to reject epistemic purism, arguing that the epistemic domain is not as distinct from the moral and practical domain as Boulton claims. For example, Zagzebski (2003) claims that epistemic value is closely connected to moral value and the wider values of the good life, arguing that it would be unlikely that epistemic value would be autonomous. This is just one of the ways that Boulton considers epistemic blamers may resist his view and argues that if this is correct, it would allow one to resist premise two of his 'Toy Argument', outlined earlier as:

1.) It doesn't seem natural to blame someone for an epistemic failing unless something moral or practical is at stake.

2.) If 1) is true, then there is no such thing as distinctively epistemic blameworthiness

3.) So, there is no such thing as distinctively epistemic blameworthiness

It appears that premise 2 depends on the notion of a distinctly epistemic evaluation, meaning a rejection of epistemic purism would allow one to respond by claiming that practical and moral stakes are *always* involved in our understanding of epistemic evaluation.

However, Boult notes that denying epistemic purism comes at a significant cost, which is far greater than the benefits of a distinct form of epistemic blameworthiness. Boult argues that it is highly implausible that we cannot epistemically evaluate people and beliefs in the absence of any considerations about stakes. We can judge whether one has a rational or justified belief whether or not something important is on the line. With this in mind, Boult states that the concept of epistemic blameworthiness is no different. Further to this, Boult argues that a lot of the literature in contemporary epistemology has a deep commitment to epistemic purism. For example, even pragmatic encroachment, a view which looks like it rejects epistemic purism, endorses it. In short, pragmatic encroachment is the view that the amount of evidence or warrant required for an agent to possess justification or knowledge that *p*, is influenced by practical stakes (Stanley, 2005). This appears like an endorsement of epistemic purism; however, it is noticeably distinguishable. Pragmatic encroachment is the thesis that the truth and falsity of a certain epistemic judgement can vary with pragmatic factors, such as the practical stakes (McGrath, 2018). As Boult (*draft*) notes, with regards to epistemic purism, a rejection of such would involve the claim that epistemic evaluation *itself* is a part of a practical or moral evaluation.

Whilst Dougherty does not explicitly raise the same objection as Boult, I believe he also shares a similar view in favour of the isolation of the epistemic domain. When responding to an objection on the apparent overlap of the ethics of belief and epistemology, Dougherty (2014) argues that whilst it may appear that the two disciplines overlap, there is, in fact, a discrete distinction between the two. Dougherty appeals to Aristotle's (2009) claim that some disciplines take as their first principles items proved in lower disciplines. He refers to an example offered by Aquinas, that the science of music is based on the science of arithmetic (1947). However, this does not make musical composition a branch of mathematics, for a skilled and ambitious composer *might also be* a mathematician, just as many exceptional physicists are also skilled mathematicians. Dougherty notes that one act, under the same aspect, is not an instance of *both* music and mathematics. One might wear both their musical and mathematical hat, but not at the same time, and they may be changed so quickly we do not notice.

5.2 Against Epistemic Purism

One could argue that Boulton's understanding and division of the normative domains is far more troubling than the epistemic blame advocate's potential commitment to epistemic purism. If so, this objection would also be concerning for Dougherty's version of epistemic scepticism.

It is worth reminding ourselves that both Boulton and Dougherty offer reductionist arguments in favour of epistemic scepticism. Both sceptics claim that epistemic blameworthiness is a disguised form of moral or instrumental blameworthiness, and therefore is not a distinct field of blame. Taking this reductionist approach to the normative domains, however, can be problematic. Using an argument offered in defence of epistemic deontology against reductionism, I will now outline how this demonstrates how Dougherty and Boulton's methodology is concerning.

Epistemic deontology is the view that there are certain duties pertaining to a distinct epistemic domain which we are subject to *qua* rational beings (Booth, 2008). Sceptical arguments, similar to those offered by Boulton (*draft*) and Dougherty (2012, 2014), are also used to object against the possibility of distinct epistemic duties. Epistemic duty sceptics argue that epistemic duties can be reduced to moral or practical duties, meaning there is no need for a distinct epistemic deontology. The main advocate of this view is Wrenn (2007), who, in short, argues that if distinct forms of epistemic duties existed they would conflict with our other type of obligations, such as our moral, legal and prudential duties. When it appears to be that we have an epistemic duty conflicting with another source of obligation, what we really have is a disguised moral duty competing with some other non-epistemic requirement. Thus, epistemic obligations simply do not exist.

To support his view, Wrenn gives an example of what he refers to as 'parental duties': duties one has *qua* parent. For example, if A is the parent of B, A would be said to have certain obligations towards B, just because they are a parent of B. Wrenn argues that one can reasonably deny that the source of parental duties is based only in the fact that A is a parent. For example, the source of these duties may be moral, as one has a moral duty to care for their child. It therefore seems that the basis or root of the parental duty in question is moral, yet is defined as a parental duty in the sense that it is a 'parent-related moral duty'. Wrenn offers this example to show how certain duties that we perceive ourselves and others to possess

can be reduced to moral duties. Wrenn believes this reductionist line of thought can also be applied to our perceived epistemic obligations.

Whilst no parallels have been made between the literature to date, I believe the similarities between Wrenn's reductionist objection to epistemic duties bears a clear resemblance to Dougherty's and Boulton's reductionist objection towards epistemic blameworthiness. With this in mind, we can explore an objection to Wrenn's position which arguably also undermines both Dougherty's and Boulton's position. The objection I will detail is offered by Stapleford in his '*Why There May Be Epistemic Duties*' (2015) paper. Stapleford defends the distinctiveness of epistemic duties against Wrenn by demonstrating how Wrenn's reductionist reasoning leads to some problematic and odd consequences. Stapleford's aim is to offer a *reductio* against Wrenn's argument, demonstrating the implausibility of the collapsing of epistemic duties into others.

Whilst Stapleford does not offer a positive argument for the possibility of epistemic duties, he arguably highlights how the reductionist reasoning is ineffective in dismissing the possibility of epistemic duties. As already outlined, this reasoning is employed by Dougherty and Boulton to argue for their epistemic scepticism stance. The epistemic sceptic (now understood in both senses of duty and blameworthiness) argues that all cases of epistemic blame or epistemic duties can be reduced to moral blameworthiness or moral duties. However, Stapleford argues that cases where there is a legal duty or blame, which also imposes a moral duty or blame, should be reduced to *just* cases of moral duties or blame by the reductionist methodology. For example, it seems to be the case that situations which pose a legal duty to do x, also imposes a moral duty to do x, in the sense that laws are often perceived as providing guidance for promoting fairness (Marmor, 2005, 2006). However, it seems right that we want to keep legal and moral duties distinct; what is considered legal is not always considered to be moral. For the reductionist, however, it cannot be true that we have *both* legal and moral obligations, for reductionism demands that we simplify legal duties or legal forms of blameworthiness into moral duties and blameworthiness. Stapleford argues that this line of reasoning also applies to instrumental duties. Instrumental duties can be understood as legal duties in that it is beneficial to conform one's actions to the law. Take for example paying taxes, not speeding or running red lights, here it is instrumentally good to conform to one's legal duties to avoid fines or imprisonment. This is puzzling then when we realize that cases of what seems like a prudential duty can be collapsed into legal duties, and legal duties can be reduced to moral duties. The same applies to blameworthiness. Failing to carry out one of these practical duties may seem practically

blameworthy, which in turn can be reduced to legal blameworthiness, which can be understood even further as moral blameworthiness.

It appears then that the very same reductionist reasoning employed by epistemic blame and normative sceptics creates a total collapse of the normative realms. Stapleford argues that this is extremely concerning for the epistemic normativity sceptic, for they need to preserve the autonomy of the moral realm to make the claim that epistemic obligations are really disguised moral requirements. For this claim to be considered as credible, it cannot preclude genuine legal and prudential requirements, for we readily do recognise these as independent sources of obligation. One way I believe the epistemic sceptic may attempt to push back from these consequences would be to bite the bullet and accept that only moral sources of blameworthiness or obligation exist. However, this is not the conclusion that either Wrenn (2007) , Dougherty (2012) or Boulton (*draft*) would be willing to accept, and when pitted against the non-sceptic who allows for the possibility of epistemic, moral, legal and prudential sources, it arguably looks very unappealing.

6. A Semantic Objection

Moving on to the final section of this paper, I will now present my own objection against Dougherty's and Boulton's sceptical argument against epistemic blameworthiness⁹ . Both Dougherty and Boulton are keen to emphasise the importance of their sceptical debate and the effect that eliminating epistemic blame will have on the epistemic normative domain. Nevertheless, I will argue that despite these claims, the consequences of the sceptical position is not as strong as both Dougherty and Boulton desire it to be. It is possible to grant the sceptic's claim that epistemic blame is not a distinct form of blame, however, the impact this would have on the notion of epistemic blame is just semantical.

Both Dougherty and Boulton, however, are clear to emphasize that their objection has more than just terminological consequences, claiming that their scepticism of epistemic blameworthiness has an impact on multiple areas of epistemology. For example, Dougherty states that if his argument is successful, it will require a serious re-thinking of epistemic responsibility. The debate also impacts whether evidentialism is true, for if standard responsibilists are right, evidentialism is false; the ethics of belief goes well beyond

⁹ This is a development of a point I raised in the conclusion of my earlier paper 'Is Epistemic Blame Distinct from Moral Blame?' (*draft*).

consideration of evidence. Boulton also argues that the dispute between sceptics and proponents of epistemic blameworthiness is more than terminological. Again, this is based on the importance of the debate, and the impact that dismissing epistemic blame has for evidentialism, blameless norm violations and blameworthy assertion, to name a few. Furthermore, Dougherty also argues that even the semantics of the debate is important. When addressing the seriousness of the taxonomy of epistemic blameworthiness, Dougherty argues that getting rid of epistemic blameworthiness reminds us that we should be doing the ethics of inquiry when investigating perceived cases of epistemic irresponsibility. In Dougherty's own words, instead of trying to "*'pervert' epistemology by remaking it in the image of ethics, we should 'become perverts' and actually practice ethics*" (Dougherty, 2014, p.164).

Despite the claims made by Dougherty and Boulton, I believe that their epistemic blame scepticism is only semantically worrying at most. Even with their sceptical argument granted, Dougherty and Boulton's claims would mean that instead of referring to actions as epistemically blameworthy, we would instead refer to them as morally or practically blameworthy, with epistemic shortcomings or consequences. These cases, although now semantically classed as cases of moral or practical blame, could still be studied by epistemologists in the sense they are still heavily related to the domain.

Perhaps it would be possible for Dougherty or Boulton to resist my objection and argue that there would be no value in continuing to study examples of such in an epistemic light. I believe this objection does have some appeal, so will now demonstrate how we can resist this claim and argue such cases would still be epistemically relevant.

Take, for example, a parent who chooses not to vaccinate their child as they believe doing so will result in them having autism. They base this belief on an anti-vaccine poster they received through the post. It seems reasonable to claim that the parent has formed a false belief and that this excuses us from making a moral claim of blameworthiness about the parent's decision, which could cause potential harm to hundreds of people. However, it may be possible that practical blameworthiness could be attributed, as there may be more costs associated if their child is ill. Giving the epistemic sceptic the benefit of the doubt, we can argue that this intuitive case of epistemic blameworthiness, can be reduced to practical blameworthiness. However, this doesn't deny the epistemic relevance or importance of the case. For example, questions such as 'what counts as a false belief?', 'when does a false belief excuse moral blameworthiness?', 'what ought one form a belief on?' can be raised from this case of practical blameworthiness which are still epistemically relevant in their relation to knowledge and justification, as well as still being normative.

Consequently, it appears that even if we grant that all cases of epistemic blameworthiness are really cases of moral or practical blameworthiness, they can still be epistemically relevant, even in a normative sense. Therefore, if epistemic scepticism is correct, all that is entailed is just a new way of classifying, or renaming previous cases of epistemic blame to ‘cases of practical/moral blame with epistemic relevance as well’.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to defend a distinct form of epistemic blame against two proponents of epistemic blame scepticism, Dougherty (2012) and Boulton (*draft*). In order to successfully defend epistemic blame, I first appealed to Nottelmann’s (2007) argument for the distinctiveness of epistemic blame. I then offered an original defence of Nottelmann’s position, critically examining two objections proposed by Dougherty and Boulton in opposition of his view. Next, I responded to what I perceived as the strongest objection against epistemic blame, known as the argument from epistemic purism. I discovered similarities between this objection, originally offered by Boulton, and Dougherty’s dismissal of the overlap between the ethics of belief and epistemology, therefore directing my counter-argument at both of their objections. In responding to their concerns I included a new application of Stapleford’s (2015) defence of epistemic duties, after discovering similarities in Dougherty and Boulton’s reductionist methodology which resembled Wrenn’s (2007) reductionist approach to epistemic duties. Despite the fact that parallels in the literature had yet to be explored, I found Stapleford’s *reductio* against Wrenn’s argument successfully established the problematic consequences and thus implausibility of epistemic scepticism. From here, I constructed a novel objection against epistemic scepticism which highlighted how, if granted, Dougherty and Boulton’s scepticism would only have a minor, semantical impact on the study of epistemic blame. This objection drastically reduced the force of the sceptical position, demonstrating how epistemic blame is still relevant in a normative sense.

This paper invites many areas for further research from those interested in epistemic blame, as well as influencing other contemporary debates in epistemology, including those concerning epistemic normativity and applied philosophy. An example of further study could be to investigate whether similar sceptical arguments can be proposed against all accounts of epistemic blame, and not just the traditionalist and cognitive account. Additionally, this paper invites more positive arguments for epistemic blame to be

put forth, as there is a current gap in the literature for papers which argue for, and not just in defence, of epistemic blame.

The importance of this debate is not to go amiss. As highlighted by Nottelmann (2007), defending the notion of epistemic blame determines whether one can be epistemically blamed for not believing, or possessing inexcusable reasons not to believe, which is extremely relevant for determining legal liability. Giving the popularity of epistemic blame, a defence of it also opens up areas of investigation into epistemic blame as a social practice, the situations on which we attribute blame and what we are doing in such contexts. These are just two ways in which the distinctiveness of epistemic blame influences other areas of epistemology.

For now, however, we can conclude this paper by declaring that epistemic blame and its place in the literature is not threatened by epistemic blame scepticism.

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